



INDIA'S YOUNG HEROES

SIGRÜN SRIVASTAVA



*Nehru **Bal** Pustakalaya*

India's Young Heroes

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Nirmala, the Snake and Saya!

Ninnala didn't like Sayal Lahnubhai Bhoya, she didn't like her at all. She couldn't understand why people told Kalgiben, Sayal's mother, "Watch your elder daughter, Kalgiben, she's a real beauty. Very soon she'll turn the heads of the young men with that lovely smile."

"Lovely smile," muttered Nirmala angrily, "it's just a grin." But deep inside her heart she knew Sayal Lahnubhai did have a charming smile that suddenly flashed over her delicate oval face and made her large, often thoughtful eyes sparkle. Her small flat nose wrinkled up a little and two dimples appeared in her soft cheeks.

Well, her smile might be very enchanting, but her much mended blouse and faded saree certainly were not. Nor were the three thin ivory bangles on each wrist anything in comparison to Nirmala's many shiny broad ones. And no one in the little Adivasi village of Bartad in Gujarat had such a beautiful necklace as hers! It was made of glittering red beads held together by a red string. Even Sayal had admired it when they met by the stream to wash clothes.

"How beautiful, Nirmala!" Sayal had said. "Let me have a closer look."

But Nirmala had turned her head away proudly and continued to beat the clothes vigorously against the rocks.

"Look," Sayal suddenly said, "look, a weaver bird,"

"That's not a weaver bird, It's just a sparrow,"

"No, Nirmala, This bird has a yellow chest, how can you say it looks like a sparrow?"

Nirmala looked at the bird once more, Yes, he did look different, Sayal was right, as usual! And that's what Nirmala did not like about Sayal Lahnubhai Bhoya—she was always right, in fact, she seemed to think that she knew everything! There was only *one* person in the village that could teach Sayal, and that was the teacher of Prathmik Shala, the village school. Sayal loved school but Nirmala took every opportunity to slip away to the fields,

"Nirmala, Nirmala," called her mother from inside the hut, "it's past eight o'clock. There is nobody else to take the cattle out. Run along, child, you can go to school some other day,"

Nirmala jumped to her feet and driving the cattle before her went down the village path, At the end of the village she passed a tumbledown mud hut. Old utensils lay scattered around, three scraggly fowls were searching for a few grains of rice, In front of the hut squatted a nine-year-old girl, cleaning rice, 'Vifakumar,' she scolded the little boy next to her, "don't eat raw rice, You are not a bird," The little boy giggled and the girl looked at Nirmala and smiled, "Where are you taking the cattle today, Nirmala?"

Nirmala shrugged her shoulders and tried to ignore Sayal Lahnubhai's friendly sister.

"Why don't you go down to the creek, you might find Sayal there with our cattle,"

"Cattle?" thought Nirmala, "How can one call a handful of goats cattle?" Then she forced a smile and said, "So long, Mirabhai." After a few furlongs she left the cattle-track to the creek and turned towards the jungle, where a short distance away a clearing offered



good grazing for the animals.

The jungle was humid and warm. Gnats danced around her head as to a silent tune. The cheerful chirping of birds filled the air. A squirrel clambered up a peepal tree and a great pied hombill spread his massive Wings and took off. Nirmala searched the ground for a few of his black-and-white tipped feathers, but found none. Disappointed, she turned to a lethargic buffalo and called out, "He **oh, move, move.**"

When she finally reached the clearing she nearly cried in annoyance. For there, right under the banyan tree, her favourite spot, somebody was **sitting**, her back against the trunk-Sayal Lahnubhai Bhoya. Small for her twelve years, she sat there dreaming, her thin legs tucked under her. She had drawn the loose end of her faded halfsaree over her hair, which was parted in the middle and combed back into a little bun.

Hearing the dull **tinkle** of the cows' bells, she looked up. A warm smile flashed over her face as she waved to Nirmala. "Hallo, Nirmala! Come over, into the shade."

Nirmala did not return the greeting but busied herself with the buffaloes. "I'll go down to the creek," she thought, "or anywhere else, but away from her."

"Come, Nirmala," called Sayal, "I'll show you something really interesting."

Interesting! Nirmala knew exactly now interesting Sayal's interesting things were. They were as dull and boring as school. Angrily she **dug** her toe into the thick grass.

The cattle wandered off in search of soft and juicy grass. Looking around irresolutely Nirmala's eyes fell on a group of shrubs that cast an imitating shade. She stalked through the grass that reached her knees.

"Hey Nirmala! ~~Why don't you~~ come here?"

"Phhh," pouted Nirmala and stuck up her nose.

"~~Hissss.~~"

Nirmala froze.

"~~Hissss.~~"

The sound sent a cold shiver down her spine. She turned around and looked straight into the round, fiery eyes of a snake, a monster of a snake- a python, ~~more~~ than twelve feet long. Over its greenish-grey, scaled body ran a ~~dark~~ brown diamond-shaped pattern. Its underside shone ~~grey~~ with yellow and brown spots.

Nirmala's hands ~~flew~~ to her mouth. She wanted to cry out, but couldn't. Hypnotized she stared into the beast's round black pupil, narrowing now in the strong sunshine.

The snake shot up. It hissed again, fiercely. Never in her life had Nirmala seen ~~6l~~. heard anythingso frightening. "~~Help,~~" she wanted to cry and run but the snake seemed to have hypnotized her. Old Lakshrilibhai was right. Her stories about snakes, crocodiles and giant lizards were true! Snakes did hypnotize people!

Suddenly, the reptile's head shot forward. Almost at the same time it lifted its tail and coiled itself twice around Nirmala's knees. Her bones felt as though they were being crushed to pieces. Nirmala cried out in pain. But stronger ~~than~~ the pain was the fear! "I am going to die," she thought. "Oh, Mama! Help!"

She ~~wanted~~ to push it away but couldn't bring herself to touch it. "Touching a snake," she remembered being told, "causes leprosy." This snake was big enough to swallow her alive. Yes, some snakes did that, old Lakshmiibhai had often told them so.

Eyes wide with fear she stared down at the wriggling snake. It was about to swing another coil around Nirmala's waist when the blow of a bamboo ~~stick~~ arrested its movement.

Sayal! Sayal had come.

Blow after blow rained down on the snake's spine mercilessly. An agitated tremor ran through the body of the massive python, yet it did not loosen its grip.

"Sayal, Sayal!!" screamed Nirmala, "I am dying."

"No! No, you are not!" shouted Sayal, as she tried desperately to strike down the wriggling snake.

"I can feel the poison," shrieked Nirmala.

"This is a python," Sayal said urgently. "It isn't poisonous."

"But I can't move."

"You are frightened and shocked that's why you can't move. I'll help you."

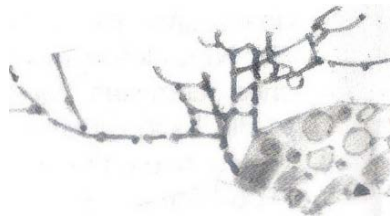
And since the stick did not prove of much use in the fight against the giant reptile, Sayal flung it away and used her hands. She gripped the snake's jaws and tried to force them open.

"It will bite you, Sayal."

"It can't," hissed Sayal through clenched teeth, "it can't."

"It's breaking my legs, Auuuuuuutch oh!"

"Calm, be calm, Nirmala, please!"





RAVI PAKHJAPÉ

Nirmala swallowed. She looked down at Sayal's taut face, stared at a pair of small brown hands trembling with the effort of forcing the snake's mouth open. Nirmala watched Sayal grit her teeth, as she pushed her hand further into the reptile's throat. Beads of perspiration formed on her forehead and blood trickled down her hand. Was it Sayal's or her own?

The snake squirmed violently. Oh, it was too strong! Sayal would never be able to fight it. The snake would kill them both!

But suddenly the jaws of the python snapped open.

"Free your legs. Kick, kick," cried Sayal and held on to the reptile's jaws with all her might.

Kicking her legs, writhing and squirming like the serpent itself, Nirmala pushed and pulled. The pressure around her legs loosened, just a bit. Now, a vigorous kick, one more pull, and she was free. Free! Nirmala flung herself aside.

But down in the grass the fight continued, fiercer than before.

"Run," croaked Sayal, "Nirmala, save yourself, run,"

But Nirmala couldn't, she had to stay, had to help. But how? Helplessly she looked down at Sayal's thin shoulders trembling with the strain of keeping the python's head away from her.

The snake hissed fiercely. Its head jerked forward, moved near Sayal's chest. Holding the snake's jaws apart, the girl bent backwards and without taking her eyes off the beast, she shouted once more, "Run, run Nirmala, go."

"But Sayal, Sayal," cried Nirmala. Paralysed with fear she watched the snake attack Sayal like an enraged fury.

"Sayal!! Oh Sayal,"

"Run, run!" Sayal's words were no more than a whisper.

Then despair lending her unknown strength, Sayal pulled herself up and with all the force she could muster she hurled the

monster's head aside, was on her feet like a flash and had dived out of the snake's reach..

"Run Nirmala, get to the cattle."

Nirmala ran. She didn't look back, couldn't, no never. She kept on running, away, away!

After a few minutes Sayal caught up with her and pulled her by the hand. Together they raced on and stopped only when they had reached the peacefully grazing cattle on the opposite side of the clearing.

Panting, they looked at each other without a word. Tears welled up in Nirmala's eyes and her lips quivered. "Don't cry," whispered Sayal, "I'm sure you will be all right."

"Yes, but Sayal, the snake. It would have killed me if you".

"Shhh, don't talk about it. It's all right."

Nirmala looked at Sayal as if she was seeing her for the first time.

"Sayal," she whispered, "I want to give you my necklace.;"

"But why, Nirmala, why? I am sure you would have done the same for me!"

Nirmala hung her head and looked down at her feet. After a while she whispered, "I don't know. I just don't know."

Then she pulled off her necklace with trembling fingers. "Please take it," she said pleadingly.

Sayal Lahnuhai Bhoya looked into the younger girl's eyes for a very long time. Slowly a warm sparkling smile spread over her delicate pale face. "I will," she said softly, "I will."

Just a Second to Act

Govindan ~~was~~ eagerly waiting for the school bell to ring-not because he disliked school, no, he quite liked school and ~~was~~ extremely fond of Mrs. Shitra Leha his English teacher.

Govindan, ~~leader~~ of ~~Class VIII~~ of the ~~Kurubarapalli~~ High School in Tamil Nadu liked studying, but he also enjoyed wandering about the village and exploring anything he found interesting. And what could be more interesting for a thirteen-year-old than the ancient Natarajan Temple, built by the Pallava dynasty. That was where Ravi and he were going after school.

"Govindan." The voice of Mrs Shitra Leha brought Govindan back into the ~~classroom~~. He sat up with a jerk, brushed back his short curly hair self-consciously and felt himself blush under the teacher's questioning glance.

"Yes, Madam?"

"Take these exercise-books and deliver them to my house. Since school will be over in a few minutes, you may leave right now." -

"Yes, Madam."

Govindan grabbed his canvas bag. On the way to the door, he passed Ravi, brushed against him deliberately and winked at him conspiratorially. They would meet at ~~Janikiram's~~ Sweet Coconut

Stand, as usual.

But on September 3, 1979 Govinclan and Ravi did not meet as they had planned...

Once outside, holding the pile of books tightly under his arm, Govinclan gazed around: in front the Kurubarapalli high road curved- its way through irrigated fields and coconut plantations; to his left, two miles away, the rice-straw roofed huts of the village lay bathed in the light of the hot afternoon sun; and there, on the outskirts of the village, he could see the ruins of the Natarajan Temple, dreaming of yesterdays' glory amongst softly swaying palm trees and lush paddy fields.

Opposite the school, on the right side of the road, a truck was parked. From behind it a man emerged, slowly, on shaky legs.

Was it the driver? No, this man was far too old. There was something odd about the way he tilted his head, something strange about his dark, hollow eyes, staring straight into the sun. Barefoot, with only a faded lungi tucked carelessly around his waist, he tapped the ground before him with a long stick. In his right hand, which shook pathetically, he held a bowl.

"A beggar," whispered Govindan. "Oh God, he is blind!"

A hot wave of pity welled up in him. Govinclan fished inside the pockets of his shafts and then inside the breast pocket of his white conan shirt for a coin, but in vain. Wasn't there anything he could give? "Maybe there's something inside my school-bag," he thought.

Bending down to search among his books he suddenly became aware of the hum of a motor-engine. He raised his head, and looked at the empty highway. A lorry was racing down at tremendous speed.

"Why isn't it slowing down," wondered Govinclan. "With such a sharp bend ahead the driver won't be able to see the parked truck





or the blind man behind it.

"Watch out!" he heard himself shout at the blind man. "A lorry is coming straight II \I, U' Then the absurdity of his words struck him. 'The old man was blind. III' couldn't se,' the lorry. III' \\\oukln't know which way to turn.

The beggar stopped and jerked his head around. A puzzled expression crept over his face. He looked straight at Govindan. looked at him but couldn't SIT him.

And do\\n the hill, at ,\er illlTl'sing speed, raced the lorry. "Oh (;od, I have to do sUlll" l'ing." Govindan dropped his bag and the thirty eight exercise books of Class VIII. Waving his arms frantically he shouted at the top of his voice. "Stop, stop. the beggar, the beggar..." Then he turned toward: thl' old man who Sl'ood helplessly in the middle of Ih,' road. his pale lips open ill ;l voiceless cry. "Run!" yelled Govindan. "Run, save yourself!"

But he kn,\\ that the l,l'd man \\\l,ukln't run. If somebody had tl" it was h,'. C. (;0\ ind'ln But he had to do it no\\', that very instant, without losing a III01III't. or it would be 100 late.

Govindan spurred forward. Thumping the ground with his h,l,r,' feet he charged across the school yard to the edge of the road. There he stopped, waved ,llld shouted, "Stop, slow down,"

The driver of the onrushing 10m shook his head. "Look ,lt this village boy," he thought, thull'ing. I lift home, eh? \\\l'l' is he doing? He ISl'I going to cross the road , is he? Oh God the fool,"

The driver blew his horn and slammed do\\ll his foot on the brakes with all his might. "III' skid," he thought, "th,l't'll be the , 'nd.,

In a burst of speed Govindan had reached the old man and flung himself at him. The old man shrieked, his stick and bowl flew out of his hands. Then both Govindan and he crashed to the ground.

Wrapping his arms protectively around the old man's shoulder Govindan took the brunt of the fall. They bumped over the rough surface of the road like an aeroplane crash-landing. The gravel stung Govindan's knee and bit into his skin. He winced and shut his eyes.

The lorry screeched past. It missed the boy and the old man by mere inches, and finally came to a halt some twenty yards away from them. "Oh God, God," cried the beggar. "What is happening?"

Govindan forced his eyes open and looked into a pair of hollow sunken eyes, hazy and dead. He shuddered and swallowed so that his voice wouldn't crack as he whispered, "We are safe, Grandfather, don't worry."

The old man coughed and stuttered, "I don't understand, I, I... Where is my stick, I need my stick. Without my stick, I am lost."

"I'll get it for you, Grandfather," said Govindan. "Come, get up." He helped the old man to his feet and holding him by the elbow led him to the side of the road.

Suddenly a sharp pain shot through his knee. His hand was throbbing. Blood trickled down his cheek. Govindan wiped it off with the back of his hand and turned around to look for the old man's stick.

Then he saw the lorry driver, marching towards him, shaking his fists violently. From under the cap that was pulled low down on his forehead, his eyes blazed with fury. He bellowed something in a language Govindan did not understand.

Why was the driver so angry? Govindan had done all he could to save the old man. It wasn't the old man's fault either. "Oh, no," cried



Govindan and stepped in front of the beggar protectively. "Let me explain."

The driver paid no attention. In three more strides he was at the boy's side, had grabbed him by the shirt and was shaking him vigorously.

"Sir," cried Govindan, "listen please." But how could he explain when the man didn't speak his language?

Gesticulating frantically Govindan cried in broken English, "The old man... blind. No seeing. No seeing truck."

The driver raised his fist threateningly.

But the blow was never struck.

Suddenly loud shouts, "Get him!" rent the air. Like a swarm of bees the children of Kurubarapalli High School rushed towards the road. "Get him, get him, he has caught Govindan!"

Startled, the driver turned around. Shaking his fist he shouted something incomprehensible.

"Let go, let go of him," the children cried. "Govindan, we are coming. Let go, or we beat you." And like a pack of wolves they leaped at the driver and would have pulled him to the ground had not a commanding voice checked them, "Children, children, what is going on. Off the road, off the road. We don't want to have an accident. Off the road, do you hear?"

Reluctantly the children got off the highway, mumbling angrily under their breaths, "The coward. He should be sent to jail."

The headmaster beckoned Govindan and the lorry driver to the kerb while Mrs. Shitra Leha attended to the old man.

"Sir," said Govindan urgently, "let me explain. I did all I could to save the old man. I don't know why the driver is so furious?"

The headmaster put his hand affectionately on Govindan's head. "I saw what happened, my boy. I am proud of you. A second's delay

and the old man would have been dead. Now let me talk to the driver." With these words he turned to the man who was still fuming beside him. "Do you speak some English?" he asked, not unkindly.

"A little. Let me tell you your school kids..."

"Wait a moment. Allow me to explain why Govindan dashed across the road."

The children watched the two men, their eyes fixed on the driver, whose face suddenly turned ashen. There was a tremor in his voice as he murmured, "... see." Then he turned to Govindan and said in his broken English, "... am sorry, , am very sorry."

"I Am Burning!"

Tears rolled down the face of the woman as she bent over the bed in the Intensive-care unit of the General Hospital at Patna and gazed at the bundle of white bandages, that was her daughter. She whispered, "Sonia, my Sonia I"

Sonia Sinha did not answer. She didn't stir. Was she still alive? Was her heart still beating?

"Doctor, is my child dying?" asked the woman, terrified. "Doctor, nurse, please save her," she implored.

The doctor put an arm around the woman's small shoulders and led her away towards the window. "Believe me, Mrs. Sinha, we are doing our best."

"I know, Doctor, I am sorry. But I have just lost my husband, I couldn't bear to lose her too. Please, save her."

"We are doing everything possible, but she has received third degree burns, A 10 depends on her strength and will to survive."

"But Doctor, she has been here nearly three weeks."

"It may take her three months or even longer to recover."

"Oh God_"

"Don't cry, Mrs. Sinha, please. Sonia is a brave girl. Otherwise she wouldn't have done what she did."



Sonia Sinha listened to the regular breathing of her younger brother and sister—little Shanat, who had just learned to talk, and Shalini, five-years-old, looking so lovable in her sleep. Her frilled cotton nightdress had crept up and exposed her back to the fan which was rotating at full speed,

"I'd better cover her," thought Sonia and suddenly realized how she missed them, now that she was staying away with her grandparents in Patna. There she attended the Convent of St. Joseph. She liked the Convent and the teachers, but wished she could attend school here in the small town of Arrak in Bihar, where her father was working as a child specialist at the government hospital. But her father had said, "I want my children to receive the best possible education to open all vistas of life for them."

Sonia Sinha didn't know what "vistas of life" meant, but she knew her parents had her interests at heart. That's why she didn't object and studied hard. She returned to her home only during the holidays and sometimes on special days such as yesterday—her eleventh birthday. What a wonderful day it was! All her old friends, aunts, uncles and cousins had come. She had worn a new frock—light blue with white lace and bows and a white ribbon held back her black hair. Her large brown eyes had sparkled in the light of eleven candles on the chocolate birthday-cake. What a wonderful birthday it had been! Oh how wonderful it was to be eleven and to be at home with Mummy, Papa and the little ones.

Shalini stirred. That brought Sonia back to earth. Softly she jumped out of bed, tiptoed across the room and pulled her sister's nightdress down,

In the dining-room her parents were talking as they ate dinner.

"Please see what is wrong with the valve of the cooking gas cylinder, Anand. It was so tight. I couldn't open it."

"I'll see to it right after supper."

"I hope you can repair it. Clicking on the kerosene stove is almost impossible in this heat. Oh, the water is still boiling, I have to take it off."

Sonia felt like joining her parents but she knew her father wouldn't like her to be awake so late at night. So she slipped back into bed and fell before she was able to remember six of her birthday presents, she was fast asleep.

* * *

"Ah."

Sonia sat bolt upright in her bed.

Had somebody cried? Shanat? Shalini! One look at their sleeping faces and Sonia sighed with relief. Oh, she must have had a bad dream. Her heart still thumping, she was about to curl up and go back to sleep when she heard her mother shriek.

"Come back, Anand, forget the valve. The gas is on fire. You'll get burnt Anand, Anand."

"No, Maya, I must close it," she heard her father's strained voice.

"But the fire! Come out Anand, come out,"

Suddenly he cried out in agony, "Run Maya, save yourself! The children, the children. Oh God... the heat."

Sonia jumped out of bed. "Papa, Papa." She was in the dining-room in a flash.

A few feet away from the kitchen she saw her mother, white knuckles pressed against her lips, trembling. She suddenly stepped forward to catch her husband, who staggered through the kitchen door and fell into her arms. She almost collapsed under the weight of the tall, broad-built man.

A blast of heat from the kitchen clawed at Sonia's face, the gas

cylinder was on fire. It could explode any minute! "Air, air, we need air," shouted Sonia. "Mummy, move."

But all that her shocked mother was able to do was to whimper, "Anand, Anand, he is unconscious."

Sonia leapt forward and grabbed her father by the shoulder. An awful smell of scorched flesh hit her nostrils. She felt sick. She looked down at her father and shuddered. His face seemed to be one large blister and the skin of his neck gaped fiery red. "Papa."

"Pull! Mummy, pull!" she cried and started to drag her father away from the kitchen and through the dining-room. "Out, let's get out."

Sonia and her mother panted, breathless. The hot air stung their eyes and hurt their lungs. They shifted the inert body on to their backs, pushed through the main door, down the steps, across the driveway and on to the lawn. Then they collapsed on the grass.

"Mrs. Sinha, Mrs. Sinha, what has happened?"

Sonia lifted her head and looked at the sympathetic faces of their neighbours.

"My God!" whispered the old couple as they drew nearer. "What has happened to Doctor Sinha?"

"The gas," choked Mrs. Sinha, "the gas, oh God, my husband."

"Anand, Anand," she cried as she fell over her husband's lifeless body.

"We must get help," cried the old lady. "Go quickly, Vinod, phone the ambulance. I'll stay."

The old man hurried down the road while his wife stroked Mrs. Sinha's hack gently and murmured, "Please, don't worry, dear, help will soon be here."

Suddenly Sonia remembered Shalini and Shanat. "Oh God," she whispered and all colour left her face.

She was on her feet in a flash and raced across the driveway, shrieking, "Shalini, Shanat. They are inside the house."

"Sonia, wait," she heard the old lady shout, but by then she had already reached the front door and pulled it open.

The heat inside the house slapped her face like an iron hand. She reeled back unable to enter. The fire inside the cylinder had turned the small ill-ventilated kitchen into a furnace, burning, charring, melting everything.

With an unnerving clatter a pyramid of pots and crockery crashed to the floor. Then the Window-grill thundered down into the sink, almost drowning the desperate cry for help from the bedroom.

Shalini! Shanat! Oh God, they are burning!

Taking long gulps of air and holding it in her lungs Sonia pushed open the door. She sprinted through the drawing-room and was in the dining-room.

The sight that met her eyes was terrible.

The furniture had cracked and splintered. The doors of the sideboard hung open and were wobbling on their hinges, the contents of the shelves scattered, broken on the floor.

The heat scorched her face, arms, chest and legs. The hair at her temples curled up and vanished into nothingness. The stink of her burnt skin filled her with panic and a strange dizziness swept over her. "Turn back, before it's too late," an inner voice seemed to say. But something hammered inside her brain, "Save your brother, save your sister."

Sonia stumbled forward. She nearly fell into the bedroom where Shalini sat crying in her bed, clutching her little brother to her chest. Her hair, wet with perspiration, fell over her flushed red face.

"Sonia. Oh Sonia." With an anguished cry, Shalini threw herself

into her sister's anTIs. Sonia caught her and winced with pain. She wanted to say something reassuring, but her voice seemed to have dried up inside her throat.

Gasping for breath, she swung her sister on to her right hip and pressed little Shanat against her chest. "Sonia! Mama! Papa!" whined the little boy.

"Shhh Shalini. Shhh Shanat," Sonia soothed the trembling children and tried to smile encouragingly at them.

It was then that she saw her hands. Or was it a hand, this mass of raw flesh and blisters. For the second time that evening she felt her legs give way. Terror swept over her.

"I can't get out of here. We will all die," she thOlight. But the voice inside her urged, "Sonia move! You will make it."

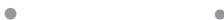
And Sonia moved.

Slowly at first, as if on wooden legs, she staggered forward with the added weight of her sister and brother, then she broke into a run and charged out of the room. Behind, she heard the shelf clatter to the ground. The breath she was holding in threatened to burst her lungs and her l, 'gs turned to lead. She wouldn't make it to the front door!

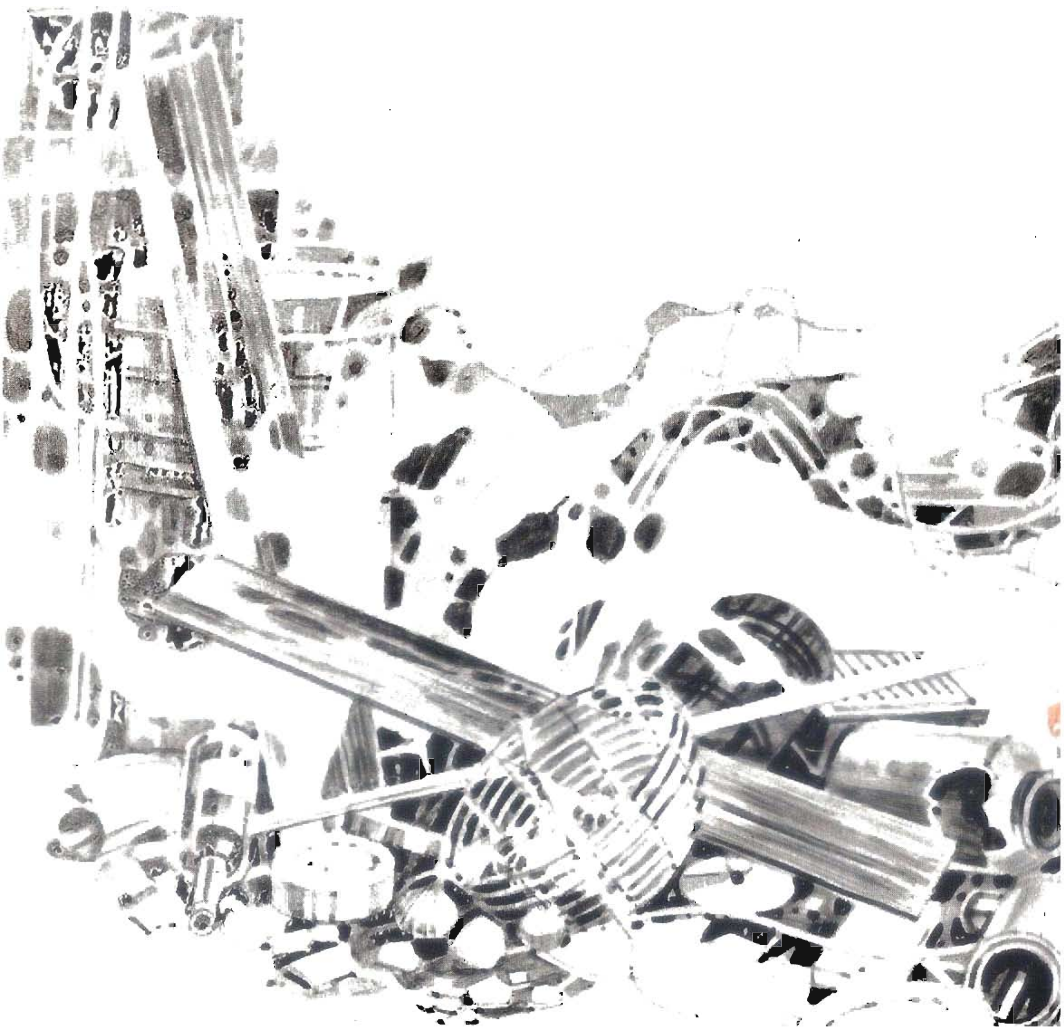
"You will, Sonia, you will," said the voice inside. Sonia gritted her teeth and pushed on.

Now she had reached the door and thrust it open. Without lifting her head, she stumbled down the steps. And then she cried in pain, "Ahhh, Mummy, I am burning. I am burning!"

Her legs gave way and she fell into a deep abyss of dark nothingness.



"Don't speak," said the doctor gently as he looked into the dark





eyes of the girl in the hospital bed. "You are well."

"Where is my mother, my father? Where are Shalini and Shanat?"

"Your mother, brother and sister are fine."

"But why am I here? Why all these bandages. It hurts... My face ,,"

"You have been very ill," said the doctor sympathetically. "Your face, neck and hands have been badly burned. But inside you are the same: You are the brave, intelligent girl that saved her brother and sister. I don't think you are afraid of a few scars. What do you say, Souia?"

Sonia looked at him, her eyes filled with tears. "No," she whispered after a long time, "of course not."



Death Walked in their Midst

Shatrughna's deep brown eyes sparkled with excitement. He clapped his hands and beamed. "How wonderful! I love plays. One day I'll be Arjun in the Mahabharata." And puffing out his chest he shouted, "Krishna the changeless, take my chariot, there where the warriors, bold for battle, face their enemy."

The women giggled behind their saree pallus and the children screamed with laughter. Then they mimicked Shatrughna with glee, "Krishna the changeless, take my chariot...!"

All of them loved the twelve-year-old orphan, who had come to live with his uncle some years ago. Everyone in the village of Kelabari liked the slender boy, who was always willing to give a helping hand and was ever ready for a laugh and a little fun.

"All right, Shatrughna," said Chitan Devi, the eldest of the women, still chuckling softly to herself, "we'll take you with us. We are leaving early in the evening."

Shatrughna jumped about with excitement and then dashed down the village path towards his uncle's hut.

Whistling and singing at the top of his voice Shatrughna bathed. After changing into a fresh cotton shirt and shorts, he squatted down before his brass *thali* in the dark slinky kitchen and began wolfing

down his food.

"Slowly, Shatrughna, son, slowly."

To eat slowly was difficult for Shatrughna, and to eat his favourite peas and rice slowly was impossible. Finally he licked his lips and his fingertips, and cried, "What a delicious meal, Aunt. I think I have eaten too much."

"As usual," smiled his aunt.

"But today I will need all this food for we are going to see the Mahabharata in Bhata. We will be back in the morning. Chitan Devi is taking us."

"That's all right, Shatrughna, but take care, and... behave yourself."

"I will Aunt, I will," said Shatrughna and added with a mischievous smile, "as usual." And out he went. His aunt shook her head with an affectionate smile, and sighed.

The sun was setting, when the group of four women and six children was finally on its way. Night crept over the barren plain dotted with bushes on both sides of the narrow road. A cold November wind nipped their noses.

"Winter is around the corner," said Chitan Devi and the other women nodded, drawing their shawls tighter around their shoulders.

Shatrughna took little Nirmal's hand and whistled softly.

"Let's follow the railway track," suggested Chitan Devi when they reached the railway line which ran from Bhilai, "it's easier to cross the Phuljhar nullah that way."

"But is it safe?" asked Shatrughna.

"Safer than the road. No train comes at this time. Come on, let's hurry. We shouldn't be late."

Shatrughna helped the women and children up on to the track.



Then holding Nirmal's hand firmly, he led the way. Night had fallen like a **thick** blanket. They had to feel rather than see their way. But once Shatrughna discovered the right length of stride to take, walking over the sleepers was easy.

"Slowly, Ma, I can't run so fast," he heard a boy cry from behind, and little Babli in **Chitan** Devi's arms started to whine.

"Shhh," soothed Chitan Devi, "don't cry. We'll soon be there. Now, do you know the story of Shakuntala?"

"Yes," teased Shatrughna, "quite well. I have heard it a hundred times."

"All right," began Chitan Devi unperturbed, "here is Shakuntala's story for those who don't know it and for those who have heard it over a hundred times."

Shatrughna groaned in mock boredom, but he listened entranced, forgetting time and place as Chitan Devi brought to life the sorrows and joys of the king and Shakuntala.

All was silent except for Chitan Devi's voice. But suddenly Shatrughna paused. Wasn't there a slight **tremor** in the track?

With knitted brows he tried to pierce the darkness before him, then turned around. "Shhh," he said, "isn't there a train coming?"

"A train, a train," shrieked the children panicking.

"Ah," scolded Chitan Devi, "what nonsense! At this time no train has ever passed this track and never will. Behave yourself, Shatrughna. Stop scaring the children, and don't interrupt me all the time. Now, where was I... Ah, yes, Shakuntala wept..."

Shatrughna shrugged his shoulders. Maybe Chitan Devi was right. He too had never heard of a train coming down this track at 8 o'clock in the evening.

Shortly afterwards they reached the narrow bridge running over the Phuljhar nullah. A sudden gust of wind whistled and howled

through the girders. It tugged at their hair and pinched their faces with cold fingers. "Stay close together," shouted Chitan Devi, but the wind carried her words away. Little Nirmal shivered and held Shatrughna's hand tighter.

"Hurry, hurry," urged the women. Their feet pounded rhythmically, as Chitan Devi herded the small group over the bridge. In great haste they pushed forward with Shatrughna in the lead. They had reached the middle of the bridge, when suddenly another tremor ran through the rails.

"The bridge is shaking!" cried a woman.

"Ma, the bridge is breaking!" screamed a girl horrified.

"Nonsense!" shouted Chitan Devi against the wind. "It's the Wind, the wind. Hurry, hurry."

Shatrughna strained to hear. Wasn't that the sound of a train behind them, or was it right in front of them? Once again his eyes tried to pierce the darkness but in vain. Another gust of wind whipped his face.

There, something was coming. Shatrughna could feel it in the air, something rushing on the wings of night. It was hurtling forward. A train, a train.

"Nirmal, Chitan Devi, run, run everybody, run!"

But there was no time to run ~~away~~. He could already feel the steaming engine in front of him—not more than 50 yards away. It was bound to run them down. He could feel the engine, sense it, but was unable to see it. It was a ghost train, without lights!

"Jump, everybody, jump!"

Lifting Nirmal into his arms Shatrughna leaped off the track and pressed himself against the vibrating steel girders of the bridge. He turned his face to the right, and saw the massive black shadow of a steaming engine explode into the dark. Hissing and fuming it thun-

dered towards them.

For a moment he thought he heard Chitan Devi's high-pitched shriek, then the blast of the engine swallowed up everything.

"Oh, God, help us." Shatrughna dung to the cold steel girders, nearly squashing the little girl trembling in his arms. The strong gust of the speeding engine nearly knocked him off his feet.

Ghost-like, as suddenly as it had come, the lone engine vanished. The silence that followed was eerie and frightening. Why was nobody shouting?

Then Nirmal cried, "Mama. Mamaaaa." There was no answer.

Shatrughna had expected to hear Chitan Devi curse the engine, the driver, probably both of them. But not a single word broke the silence. The night was still and quiet—deadly quiet.

"Chitan Devi, Babli, Sukku Bai," Shatrughna called their names, one by one, but nobody answered.

Fear gripped his heart. What had happened? Where were they all?

Suddenly a whimper reached his ear, a small whine, that grew into a pain-laden shriek.

"Babli, it's Babli," he cried into the dark. "Where are you?"

Burying her face in Shatrughna's chest Nirmal wailed, "I want to go home."

"Of course, Nirmal," Shatrughna managed to say in an almost normal voice. "We'll do that. But wait, let me see what has happened." Carrying the girl on his hip Shatrughna got back onto the railway track. His eyes widened with alarm as he stepped over the sleepers to where the little girl was howling in pain.

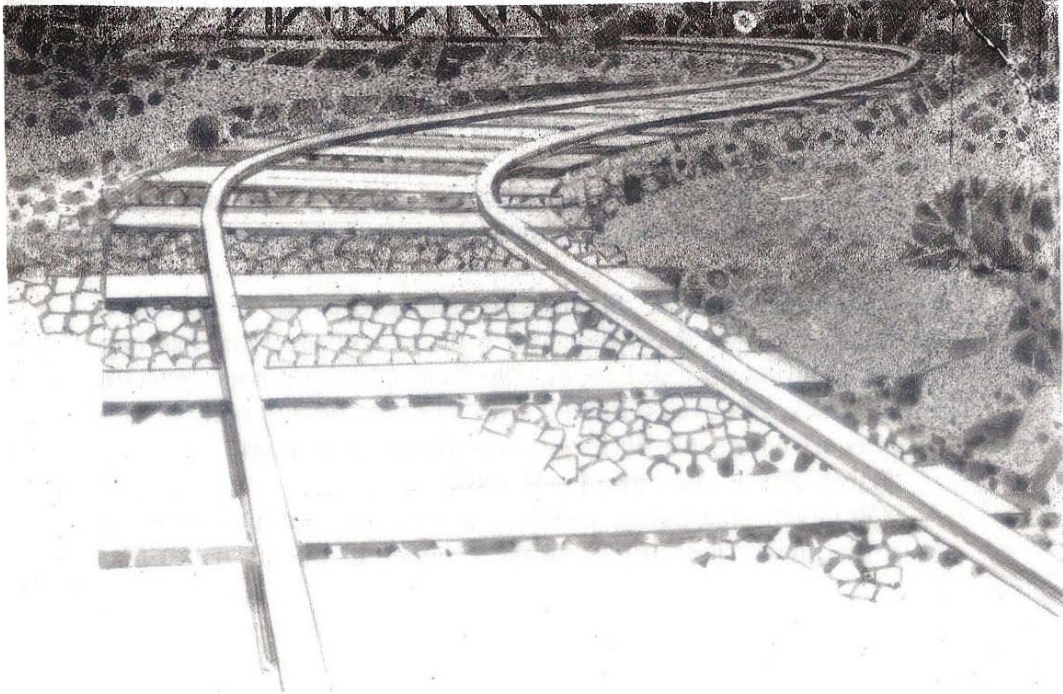
"Bahli, Babli," he called out softly.

"Oh God!" Shatrughna shrieked, as his bare foot hit something, that rolled away. For a moment he felt his legs huckle under him.

No, he mustn't give in, He had to save the children! He bent down and searched the sleepers and the gravel between them till his hands met the body of a baby, kicking its legs in agony, Gently he picked it up and pressed it against his shoulder. "Babli, Babli," he soothed, But when he ran his fingers over her back, he felt a gaping wound, dripping with blood.

He felt dizzy but fought against it. He knew he had to lean: immediately, without a second's delay, but couldn't. "Chitan De'i," he cried once more into the night, "Chitan De'i", Sukku Bai,

The wind carried their names away. There was no answer "Come, Nirmal, hold my hand," said Shatrughna in a trembling voice. "We have to get help," But in his heart he knew that help would come too late.





RAVI RANJIT

He turned away and started on his long journey through the night towards the nearest village-Mungri. He left the railway line in search of the road. Gripping Nirmal's hand tightly and pressing the wounded baby against his chest, he groped his way through the dark. Branches hit his face, lunged at his arms, tripped his legs. He stumbled and fell, bringing Nirmal down to the ground with him.

Pulling himself up, he helped the shaken girl to her feet and staggered on. "It's nothing," Shatrughna managed to say, "it's nothing, Nirmal."

The eerie hooting of an owl reached Shatrughna and made him shiver. He didn't know that the night could be so dark, so menacing and terrifying.

Something swooped past him on soft, dark wings. He shrank back. "A bat," he thought, "just a bat." A rustle in the tall grass startled him. He halted and listened—the night was full of strange noises: the howl of a jackal, the mocking laughter of a hyena. Dangers seemed to lurk around every corner: poisonous snakes, deadly scorpions, wild dogs, and even wolves or tigers, .., He tried to brush these thoughts away, tried not to think about anything that might weaken his resolve, He had to reach Mungri.

And he did. Reeling with exhaustion, almost falling, he knocked at the door of the first hut. "Help!" he cried. "Help! A doctor, the baby, it's dying."

In less than a minute the whole village had crowded around him. "What's happened, boy, what's it?"

"He is covered with blood. Are you injured?"

"Not me, the baby, Save her, please. There were ten of us, now we are three. I don't know what happened, .. there was so much blood. Maybe all of them ..," His legs gave way and he sank into the

arms of the village headman. Unconsciousness engulfed him like a wave and drew him under.

*

The people of Mungri walked silently over the railway track towards Raigarh in Madhya Pradesh. No one spoke, for the incoherent words of the young boy were still ringing in their ears.

When the villagers finally reached the Phuljhar bridge they raised their lights. What they saw made their blood run cold. Between the sleepers and the track, in a pool of blood, were the disfigured remains of the train people.

The villagers lowered their lights and turned their faces away.

"How on earth could this happen?" asked the village head finally. "Didn't you hear the whistle, boy?"

"The driver didn't hear the whistle. There were no lights either."

"The lights of the engine must have failed."

"A single engine with a defective light," said a man softly to himself. "A small technical fault can result in such calamity."

"It must have been a shuttle going between stations. But it was like a blinded demon..."

"Didn't you hear the engine? You must have heard it!"

"Yes, I did, but the others didn't or if they did, it was too late." Shatrughna buried his face in his hands.

"Don't cry, boy. You are not to be blamed. You did your best. You have done more than any of us could have." Then turning to the man on his left the headman continued, "Take the boy home, Bahadur Lal. Go home, God be with you."

Shatrughna and Bahadur Lal left. The boy returned to Mungri silently, as if death itself was walking in their midst.

"Save Us Mary, Full of Grace"

I will never forget that day, Saturday, February 22, 1965. Never. Even today, after nearly fifteen years I can still hear the desperate cries of the dying, the helpless shriek, of the children, and the roar of the wind tearing the last prayer from their lips, "Maty, Mother of God, have mercy on us."

I'll always remember the look in my mother's terrified eyes, as she pulled me into her arms and rocked me like a child. "Felicitas, daughter, blessed art the Lord, who has given you back to me. Hail, Mary, full of grace, you have heard my prayers." Then I did what I had wanted to do all those haunting hours: I buried my face in my mother's shoulder and cried. My mother knelt and bathed my legs with oil, as was the custom in Jhunmeer, in Orissa when someone had been saved from death.

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"Run Felicitas," said Mother and pressed a kiss on my forehead, "You know I'd love to come, but I can't leave the little ones. And Father needs my help in the fields. Go, child, God bless you and protect you with his shield of love."

"Good-bye, Mother." I wished then that she could have come

with us to the village Keseral, five miles down the river, but ttxlay I thank Goo that she didn'r..

"Hi, Felid!" I heard a familiar voice behind me, "Why are you all dressed up?"

It could be no other than Philomina. I tried to ignore her. But to ignore Philo, my best friend, is difficult; in fact, it is impossible. "Hi, Felici!" she cried, and spun me around. "You do look heautiful in that orange saree. And matching blouse too' Hey' New earrings' Are they real silver?" She tugged at them playfully, giggling with delight. [hit her fingertips with mock anger. "Behave yourself, Philo, you are sixteen, no more a child." But then we shrieked very unlike young ladies of sixteen, "Tile boat, we are going to miss it. Run!"

Pulling our sarees up, we ran down the shore, our plaits bouncing up and down our backs, our glass bangles jingling gaily. We jumped into the long rowing boat just as it pulled away from the shore. "Gocx:l-bye, till Monday," we cried and waved out to our people till they and the village vanished from sight. We were tinally on our way to Keseral to join the procession in honour of our beloved Lady, Mary, Mother of God.

Tile boat shot smoothly through the green water while the setting sun painted the horizon orange. Tile wind brushed the palm trees with gentle hands and swayed the lush pad.ly, on both sides of the river. Tile ninet' men, women and children in the boat tillded their hands, prayed and sang to the Glon' of the lord. Philo and [sang along with them. Across the river the night crept in tj'om behind the mass of dark trees. But was it the night? [looked quest ioningly at the tough old boatman at the rudder who was scanning the sky with knitted bn)\s. Suddenlv a chilly gust of wind swept ()'er the water, making chains of ripples befirc it. Tile boat rocked. Tile children shrieked.



"It is nothing, it is nothing! Be calm..." shouted the other oarsmen, but the black threatening clouds that crawled up the sky from behind the jungle belied their words.

The river had changed. Waves rocked the boat and lashed the planks. The children flung themselves into their mothers' laps and the men gazed at the distant, worried eyes. We were right in the middle of the river.

I turned to Philoelina, "I can't swim," she whispered, her face ashen. I knew how to swim but many of the others in the boat didn't. A shiver of fear ran down my spine. Automatically we began to pray, "Oh Lord, our Father, Our prayer rang out into the rapidly darkening sky and was drowned by the howl of the wind,

"Faster men, faster!" cried the old man at the rear. "The storm is building up, We must reach the other side before we get caught in it."

The young men bent over their oars with taut and grim faces. They put all the strength they possessed into each pull. into every stroke.

Water leaked into the boat.

"Mary, Mother of God, pray for us.

A sudden white flash lit the now turbulent waters.

"Mary, Mother of Jesus, Mother of men,

"Keep on rowing, keep on rowing!" roared the boatman, "Keep on," Clinging to each other we continued to pray.

The storm raged, the river moaned, the boat began to pitch and toss helplessly in the whirling current. Suddenly the wind hit the boat's broadside with such force that "We were thrown out of our seats. Shrieking, we fell over each other, burying kicking children under us. An arrow hit my face, I knee punched my side.

"Felic, Felic," I reached out for Philo, but our hands didn't

meet. With a dull crack the boat toppled sideways, tossing us into the agitated river. The cold water closed over me, turned me over and pulled me down, [tried to break the forceful downward pull, tried to escape the confusion of arms and legs. A hand touched mine, slipped away and was gone. Philo, Philo,

My lungs about to burst I came to the surface, gasping. The terrified screams of men, \ omen and children, fighting for their lives filled the air. Hands clutched and clawed at the planks of the boat, slipping, falling, pushing each other aside ruthlessly\, desperately hanging on, till finally with a low plop the boat was lifted by a wave and sank.

Couldn't [help? Could I do nothing but watch them drown? I saw a tree-trunk offering safety not more than thirty feet away and surged forward, closing my eyes against the wind,

"Felicitas, Felicitas." I grabbed the helping hands that reached down from the trunk "Come on!" cried Marcus, "Push, push." Panting, [collapsed near the shivering group-Raimon!!!, David, Marcus and Mary. They were all alive, like me. But what had happened to the others? To Philo, my best friend?

"Philo," I cried frantically into the wind, "Philooooo,"

I had to search for her, help her, save her'

"No, Felicitas, no, There is nothing we can do right now. Wait till the storm is over."

I shivered, water ran down my face—or was it tears?

"Listen!" cried Mary suddenly, "Someone is calling."

We strained our ears. Yes, a feeble voice reached us faintly, "Help, help!"

"Why, it's Samuel Ilungdung, Jesus, Jesus."

"He's drowning!" cried Mary. "He can't make it! He doesn't know how to swim! Oh God, he's gone under!"

Nothing could he hear but the hissing of the wind and the roar (f the water.

I looked into Marv's eyes, wide "lith fear, then at David, Raimond and Marcus. No one m()ved.

"Help!"

He was calling again! III' was drowning, right in front of our eyes, Samuel Dungdung, our brother.

Suddenly a strange calmness swept ()'er nk'. I sat up, pulled off my saree, folded it into a tight bundle, and tucked it into m\ petticoat. Then I rose, and cried over the agitated dark water, "Samuel, Samuel I)ungdung, hold on. I am coming!" and dived into the river.

I struck out urgently, fighting against the wind. My petticoat, and the saree, soaked with water, weighed me down. "Samuel!" I shouted, "Here, here."

Something hopped up, a hand and then a head, Samuel's head. He was so close that I could see his terrified eyes. "Help" he cried, "Help!"

"Catch the saree," I called out to him, "I'll pull you out. Here catch." I tore the saree from my waist, and holding one end between my teeth, I,tlung the heavy bundle towards him. But the Wind carried it out of his reach.

"Get it, f)Imgdung."

Treading water, my heart in my mouth, I watched Samuel struggle forward, clawing at the water with rapid mO\ements.

"Grab it, I)ungdung, grab it!" Till' voices came from behind me. 'Il,ly Jesus, he can't make it' III' is drowning!"

From somewhere in the dark Marcus' voice reached me "Felicitas, Felicitas, come back." I would- I wanted to but n(;t without Samuel, never!

Suddenly the saree was pulled tight and was nearly tom from





the gnaw of my teeth. I bit hard into the cloth, turned around and began to labour back to the log-kicking the water with my legs-kicking, kicking, kicking, hammering with my arms, stroke after stroke, lips pressed tightly together. And when I thought I wouldn't make it, I opened my eyes to take One last look at the world I was about to leave and there in front of me were four pairs of frightened eyes.

"Felicitas, come, come!" With ~~whatever~~ strength I could muster, I pushed forward and grabbed Marcus' hands. I had reached, I was safe. Together we pulled up Samuel who coughed and retched, then threw up mouthful after mouthful of water.

Shivering, nearly crying with exhaustion we clung to each other and prayed, "Oh Lord, our Father!"

"Help!" The wind carried just this one word towards us. "Help! Help!"

Slowly Samuel Dungdung turned his head and looked at me. "It's Kindo," he whispered, "he is drowning."

Silence-none of us spoke. Even the wind seemed to hold its breath.

I shuddered and slowly, almost involuntarily rose to my feet and jumped once more into the raging water.

On that ill-fated evening in February, 1955, nearly fifty of us died. Leo and his entire family, Margaret and her ~~baby~~, and Philo, my best friend.

After the storm had spent its fury, we left the tree and swam ashore. There those of us that had been spared gathered near the ~~water~~, waiting for others that might reach the shore. We waited-but waited in vain.

Attack by Night

The night of February 14, 1980 was cold and dark. The moon had tried to break through the mass of black cloud, had tried and given up. An icy wind from the hills, carrying the smell of fresh snow, swept through the deserted narrow lanes of the little Harijan village of Ramnagar in Uttar Pradesh. It rattled the heavy, **planked** wooden doors, shook their solid iron rings, as if demanding entry. It swished in through the small high windows of the stone-and-mud houses and whirled through the courtyards.

Satish Kumar Phulsingh listened to the whistling **wind** and shivered. He felt the cold through the thin quilt he had rolled out in the corner of the **room** next to the kitchen. On one of the cots his father coughed and turned; on the other, Sita, his little sister, drew closer to the protective warmth of her mother. She whimpered in her sleep. "Tshhh," murmured her mother sleepily and pulled the worn blanket over the little girl.

Next to him, his brother stirred. "This awful cold," he grumbled "Isn't there anything else for cover?"

Satish knew there wasn't. The few rupees his father earned as a labourer and his eldest brother, Vmod, with his rickshaw were hardly enough to feed the eight members of the family. Satish too

brought home some **money from looking** after Uncle Manchand's cattle. Not that the Manchands were rich, but he and his wife were old and their sons had left the village long ago to make their fortune in the big bustling **town** of Patna. Uncle Manchand had not heard from them since. Satish Kumar Phulsingh shivered again, not because of the cold, this time, but because of fear of an unknown future. **Life was** difficult if one was poor.

There . . . that wasn't the wind; that **was** the dull thud of barefeet on their terraced roof. Then a low whispered order, "Move, man, to the left, the next house, I say, the next."

Satish **lay** motionless,

"Satish?" queried his father into the **dark** of the room, "Was that you?"

"No, Father. I think there are people outside."

"Who? Where?" cried his mother alarmed. "The calf, they are after the calf."

"It might be just a stray dog," murmured his father, but **not very** convincingly. "I'll lock it up."

Satish **heard** his father grope for his sandals and scramble to his feet. **Suddenly** a high-pitched shriek broke the stillness of the night **followed** by a hard blow against wood.

"Open," roared a hoarse voice. "Open or we'll shoot!"

Nolxx:ly in the small room stirred. Then his mother whispered, almost voicelessly, "Dacoits, oh, God!" In less than a second his father was by the door and had pushed it open. "We are coming," croaked **Satish** Kumar and slipped past his father into the **courtyard**.

A shot barked through the night followed by the terrified cry of a woman, "Help, help, dacoits!"

His father's broad hand fell heavily on Satish's shoulder. "Wait!" he hissed urgently, "Wait." Satish stopped and searched the night.

Seconds ticked by painfully. Suddenly a black shadow leaped over to the Manchand's house and vanished into the inky darkness. 'They are on Uncle Manchand's roof,' whispered Satish. 'We must help him.'

"Shhh, boy. We have to call the others."

"I'll go," said Satish and turned to cross the courtyard.

He had hardly covered half its length, when three more gunshots blasted the air and another voice barked, "Open the door you cowards, or we'll blow it in!"

Old Mother Manchand's petrified screech that followed, sent shivers down Satish's spine. He hurried on. 'They have broken in,' he thought. "I have to bring help immediately." Hugging the wall like a shadow, he silently ran down the lane.

Knocking at all the doors on the way he cried urgently, "Open up, Uncle. Help, help, dacoits have broken into Uncle Manchand's house. Help!"

Doors were flung open, sleepy faces frowned at him from behind window-grills. 'What's it Satish, what's going on? Weren't those gunshots we heard?"

"Dacoits, dacoits!" cried Satish once more. "In the Manchands' house. Quick get guns, before they loot the whole village."

"Guns?" asked an old man astonished. "There are no firearms in the village. We are poor, we have nothing to fight with but our fists and nothing to lose but our lives."

"But we'll fight!" cried another man. "Get sticks, stones or iron rods. Fast."

Satish tore along, knocking at every door calling, "Dacoits, dacoits!"

The news spread like wild fire. From all comers of the village men converged towards the Manchand's house, grim-faced, carrying

sickles and sticks. From a **distance** they could hear the dacoits bellow, "Get lost, you dirty rats or we'll shoot you like dogs,"

"Ah, they are killing us."

"Everyone of you," **was** the answer and two bullets hissed through the night.

"We must surround the house," whispered Satish's father. "Get over the wall somehow."

"How?" asked a small man with a drooping moustache, trembling in his thin **kurta** and pyjama. "They'll shoot the moment they see the tip of our noses."

"The night is to our advantage. They won't be able to see us," whispered Vinod Kumar Phulsingh. "Let's go."

"But we won't be able to see them either," snarled the skinny man.

During the argument Satish slipped away unnoticed. With the ease of a cat: familiar with every nook and cranny, he climbed the wall 'from their side of the courtyard. Clinging to the cold **rough** stones he managed to push himself over the top, and looked down into his neighbours' compound. Two shadows streaked across the Manchands' terrace and merged into the dark. From the right comer, .from behind the tamarind tree a **battery** operated search-light flashed. The sudden beam almost blinded Satish. The light travelled over the ground and Zigzagged over the doors. "One wrong move from anyone and you'll all be dead," roared the voice **from** behind the tree.

The beam danced on and would have fallen on Satish's face had he not ducked. "Gangsters," he whispered through clenched teeth. 'We'll show you." From behind one of the **three pillars** on the terrace Satish saw another figure bent over with laughter as he yelled, "Back into your holes, you rats,"

Filed with uncontrollable rage, Satish crawled **forward**, close to the house, not taking his eyes off the mocking figure that stood legs apart, in a display of brutal strength, holding his gun at the ready.

The light turned **towards** Satish. He flung himself face down on top of the wall and waited, his heart in his mouth. If they saw him, he would be dead. Not more than three feet away the light stopped, swirled and was again focussed on the doors.

Satish clawed at the mortar of the wall, felt a brick move under his grip and shook it lose. Without another second's delay, he rose to his knees, took aim and putting all the strength he possessed into the shot, flung the stone at the gunman below, not more than 10 yards away from him. The brick hit the man with such force that both he and the gun crashed to the ground. Before Satish dived back into the shelter of his own **courtyard**, he saw the dacoit scramble to his feet howling furiously, "Get them, kill them!" He put the gun to his cheek, pulled the trigger, once, twice, thrice. But the gun was silent.

Pleased Satish dropped to the ground, dashed back to the road, and **ran** straight into the arms of his father. "We don't stand much chance," his father said, "there are about nine of them and they all have rifles and a light. We have neither."

"We don't have guns, but we could have light," said Satish. He turned and stole along the innerside of the compound-wall to where their little calf mooed terrified in a corner. In great haste he tore off a few handfuls of **straw** and rolled them into a tight bundle.. He soothed the frightened animal and panned it gently. Then he **ran** back into the lane, where the villagers were crowded around the Manchands' **door**.

"Get bricks, more stones, we have to do something if we want to save the village," cried Kattar Singh and swung his sickle



"Uncle," **Satish** nudged the broad-shouldered man, "do you have matches?"

"Matches?" frowned Kattar Singh absentmindedly, "Matches." He checked his pockets and pressed a box into Satish's hand. Then he swung back and shouted aggressively at the locked door, "Kick it in, climb the roof. Come on, have you turned chicken-hearted?"

"I'll fight."

"And so will I," answered Satish's father.

"I too," whispered Satish and slipped back into their courtyard towards the opening in the wall. His hands shook as he struck the match to light the straw bundle. Heart pounding he blew the flame alive. The straw crackled. **Smoke** got into his eyes. He coughed. He peeped cautiously through a small opening in the wall: into the completely dark courtyard. The search-light had been switched off.

"Now," thought Satish, "it's now or never."

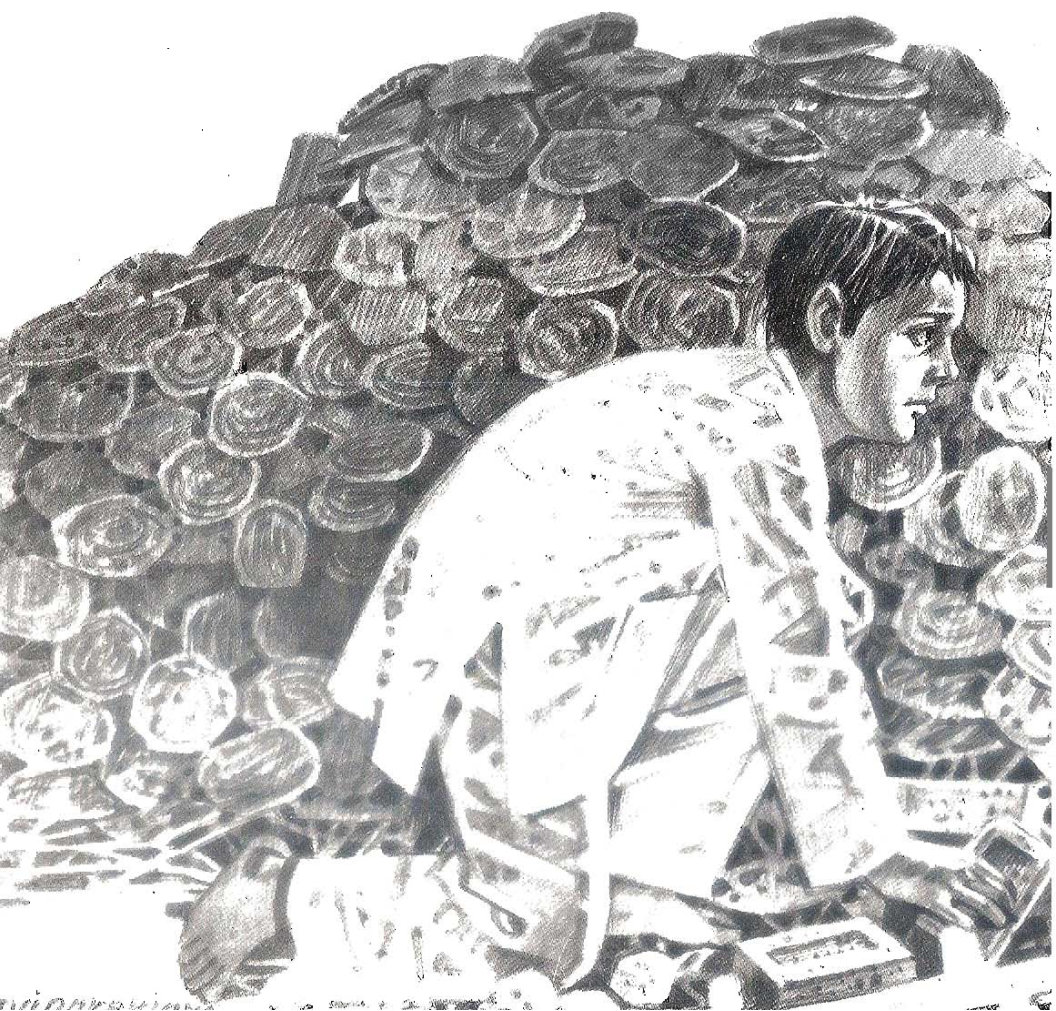
He pushed through the opening, reached back, grabbed the burning bundle and hurled it towards the middle of the Manchands' yard.

It shot through the dark like a meteor then fell to the ground, lighting up the compound. Shadows dived into the shelter of pillars, trees and boxes. "Shoot him, shoot him!"

Satish broke into a run. Bullets whizzed past him, missing him by inches as he zigzagged across the courtyard like a hunted rabbit.

"Ah!" shouted a stout man with a wild beard, from the verandah, "Take this," and raised his gun.

Satish swung to the left and flung himself behind a massive, neatly piled heap of cowdung cakes. Gasping for breath, his sides aching as if a thousand needles were piercing him, Satish almost buried himself under the heap and waited. Bullets hammered into the cowdung heap, then the guns were silent. "Get the fire out of





the way," roared one of the dacoits. "Stamp it out!"

"Oh no," thought Satish, "it's our best weapon." He scrambled to his feet and looked towards the house, where a man in black kurta and trousers had jumped into action. The man spurted forward but was suddenly struck by a brick, that got him between the shoulders. He stumbled and fell.

Satish glanced back and saw the triumphant face of Uncle Kishen vanish behind the wall.

"Get them, get them!" Hearing his father's encouraging cry filled Satish with new strength. Groping around for a weapon, his hands fell on a couple of bricks. Clutching one and forgetting all caution, he straightened up and flung it at the dacoit who was now back on *his* feet. The brick caught the man on the chin. He was stunned and fell back, his hand flying to his jaw as he grunted in pain. His face twisting into a mask of rage, he turned sideways and glared at his attacker, ready to go for him, instead of the fire. For a second their eyes met in the flickering light of the burning straw. Never in his life had Satish seen such fury and hatred in a man's eyes. He shivered and bent down to pick up another brick. This time he hit the man's forehead. The man spun around twice and crashed to the ground.

A cry of joy escaped Satish's lips. "We'll get them, we'll get them!" he rejoiced and picked up a third brick to aim at the dacoits behind a bullock-cart. Ha, he couldn't fail. But the flames exposed his hiding-place.

As Satish swung around and aimed, a bullet hit him, struck the right side of his face. Still gripping the brick, Satish Kumar Phulsingh sank to the ground, without a word.

"Satish, son," cried a voice. Satish Kumar did not hear his father's cry, nor the enraged roar of the villagers who swarmed into the

courtyard from -all sides. He was vaguely aware of his brother dragging him into a room and looking down at him with a strange expression in his eyes. Then he knew nothing.

He knew nothing of the fierce battle that continued in the Manchands' courtyard where the villagers fought with bricks, stones and sticks for over two hours. They fought ~~with~~ sickles and bare fists for their lives and those of their families. They fought till the leader of the dacoits was caught and knelt before them in the dust, his hands tied behind his back

No one would ever forget the moment when the police finally ~~took~~ him and his companions away.

And no One in Ramnagar would ever forget the courageous young boy who had ~~given~~ the sight of his right eye ~~to~~ help free his village from the terror of nine ruthless dacoits.

Sayal Lahnuhai Bhoya **was** born on 1 June 1971 in Gujarat and studied at Prathnik Shala. She speaks Gujarati. She has two brothers and a sister. Her father is a labourer. Her hobbies include music, reading and spans.



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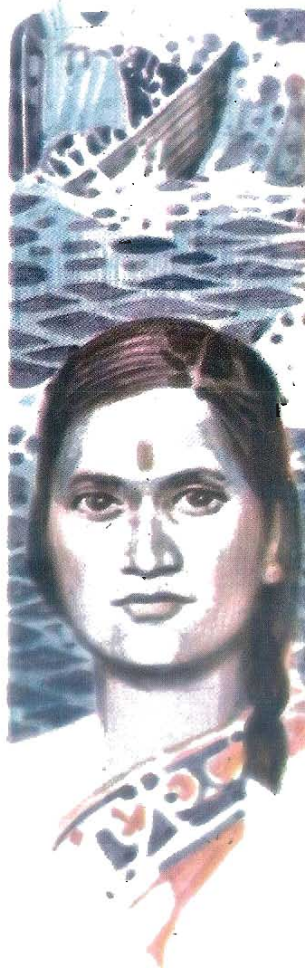
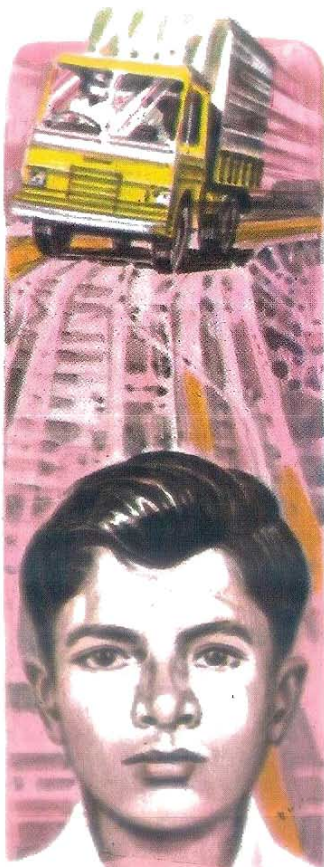


Felicitas Soreng was born on 21 June 1950 in Orissa. After her matriculation she trained as a nurse at the Government Hospital in Rourkela. She speaks Oriya, Hindi and English. She has two brothers and five sisters. Her father is a farmer. Her hobbies include music and handicrafts.

Satish Kumar Phulsingh was born in 1968 in Uttar Pradesh. He did not attend school but contributed to the family's income by looking after the cattle of others. He speaks Hindi. He has two elder brothers and a sister. His father is a labourer.



The six stories included in this book are based on actual deeds of courage and gallantry which earned children national awards. The author has imaginatively reconstructed the incidents through interviews and responses to questionnaires, besides using the information available with the Indian Council of Child Welfare which has instituted these awards.



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